

VZCZCXRO1830
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0181/01 0381339
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 071339Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0913
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1048
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1910
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2172
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000181

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI NOT OPTIMISTIC ABOUT MOUSSA VISIT

BEIRUT 00000181 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Michele Sison for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Ambassador paid an introductory call on Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, one day before Arab League Secretary General Moussa's return to Beirut. The Speaker did not appear optimistic that Moussa's visit would lead to a breakthrough in the ongoing impasse over the presidential election, now hung up on cabinet formation, suggesting that new ideas were needed. Predictably, Berri complained that the U.S. had not taken a clear stand on the Arab League initiative. Berri expressed concerns about the January 27 clashes, stating it was in no one's interest to stir up trouble in Lebanon. Berri also took the opportunity to accuse the "illegitimate" Siniora government of lying about compensation payments to victims for the 2006 war. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, paid an introductory call on Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri at his office in Ain el-Tineh on February 6. Berri advisor Ali Hamdan also was present. In what was a friendly meeting, both agreed to keep the gloves off during future encounters to ensure mutual understanding and frank discussions of each other's positions.

ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE
STALLED OVER CABINET FORMATION

3. (C) Berri confirmed the February 7 return of Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa to Beirut to seek a solution to

SIPDIS
the ongoing presidential crisis before the February 11 parliamentary electoral session. He predicted Moussa would do a round of individual meetings that day with Berri, PM Siniora, majority leader Saad Hariri, and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, before reconvening a group meeting with Hariri (accompanied by Amine Gemayel) and Aoun on February 8.

4. (C) Berri did not appear optimistic that Moussa would

reach a breakthrough, stating only, "We'll see..." The problem with the Arab League initiative, Berri explained, was that it did not send a clear message the first time (after the January 5-6 meeting in Cairo) and the second time (after the January 27 meeting), when the message was supposed to be clarified, it became more ambiguous. After the first round, everyone accepted Michel Sleiman's candidacy as the consensus president. Now, the initiative is hung up on the government, he said.

15. (C) Berri himself was still pushing the 10/10/10 formula, which "many Ambassadors, including Europeans" supported, he claimed, but March 14 would not accept. Berri suggested that it was time to discuss "something new." Claiming it was not his role to suggest a new formula, Berri nevertheless suggested that it was time to discuss "something new." In the past Moussa had discussed an idea put forward by former PM Selim Hoss of a smaller cabinet (ten or 14) plus a "king prime minister" independent from either the majority or the opposition. Majority leader Saad Hariri had accepted this idea he claimed. (Comment: Our memory recalls otherwise. End comment.)

16. (C) Berri said he would ask Moussa to stay at least until February 10, and, in the event the parliamentary session did take place on the 11th, until that evening. Moussa has nothing scheduled until February 12, Berri said, citing an EU-Arab League meeting that day in Malta, so there is nothing to prevent him from staying.

17. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question, Berri said he did not believe Moussa would make a side trip to Damascus this time, since things did not go so well at the January 27 Arab League meeting, which the Syrians attended. Apparently realizing he had said too much, he hastily added, "I know this from the declaration." He complained that the U.S. had not taken a clear stand on the initiative.

A VERY DELICATE COCKTAIL

BEIRUT 00000181 002.2 OF 003

18. (C) The Ambassador expressed her condolences for the Amal member killed in the January 27 clashes between the army and Shia demonstrators in south Beirut and appreciation at Berri's efforts to calm the situation. Berri, admitting that he was afraid of another civil war (the clashes occurred in the same area where Lebanon's 15-year civil war began), said he immediately had spoken to people in the street in an effort to calm the situation.

19. (C) The perpetrators, he suggested, were after one of three things: 1) destroy Michel Sleiman's chances for the presidency; 2) create problems between Hizballah and the army; or 3) create problems between the Muslims and Christians. Lebanon is a "very delicate cocktail," he said, adding that it was in no one's interests -- not the U.S.', Europeans', or Arabs' -- to stir things up.

BERRI ACCUSES U.S. OF MYOPIA IN MIDDLE EAST

110. (C) The Ambassador, noting that while Chiefs of Mission may come and go, stressed that U.S. policy on Lebanon remains unchanged. There is bipartisan support for Lebanon in Congress, as well as strong support from the Bush administration, especially for the Special Tribunal and military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Berri stressed the importance of the "image" of U.S. foreign policy; some in Lebanon, he said, feel the U.S. looks at Lebanon through one eye. You mean we're half blind? the Ambassador responded, eliciting a warm laugh from Berri.

111. (C) The Lebanese people are not against the U.S., Berri said, noting that in south Lebanon, the "swimming pool of the

Resistance," 60 to 70 percent are U.S. citizens, including in Berri's village of Bint Jbeil. Five of my children are U.S. citizens, he noted. However, many Lebanese are against U.S. policy, especially concerning Israel.

¶12. (C) Lebanon historically had always been influenced by outside actors, he continued, including the U.S., and Lebanon suffers from a lack of coordination among these actors. Right now, the problem was between Syria and Saudi Arabia, with the U.S. supporting the latter.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador stressed that the U.S. is actively engaged with many countries that are friends of Lebanon. Yes, Berri said, except Syria, which is a big problem. The Syrians complicate the situation in Lebanon, he said, adding that he was not ashamed to admit this because he wanted to serve his country. The U.S. talks to the Syrians and Iranians about Iraq, he said, and should improve further its relations with Damascus by sending the U.S. Ambassador back to Damascus.

ATTACKING THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT

¶14. (C) Berri questioned the legitimacy of the Siniora government. The Ambassador disagreed. Berri, however, pointed to recent reports that the Higher Relief Council had failed to provide a second wave of compensation victims of the 2006 war as more evidence of the government's corruption. He claimed Siniora was not telling the truth that the money, which was not his to begin with, had been disbursed; the Saudi Ambassador and Kuwaitis had told him their money was still there, untouched, he claimed. Does Siniora want the Iranians to pay the compensation? he asked rhetorically.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Berri clearly made an effort to turn on the charm for his first meeting with the Ambassador, portraying himself as a reasonable actor trying to find a solution in the middle of Lebanon's complicated political drama. Hamdan told Pol/Econ Chief afterwards that Berri was extremely pleased with the meeting.

¶16. (C) We wonder what "new" ideas Berri will discuss with Moussa regarding cabinet formation. We doubt March 14 would be willing to give up the prime ministership, and we doubt

BEIRUT 00000181 003.2 OF 003

the opposition will yield in its insistence on a blocking third -- in which case, round two of the Arab League initiative will end up in another draw, with, we predict, no election on February 11. End comment.
SISON